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## Students' Participation in Search for Sustainability: A Case Study from Lithuania

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### Abstract

While many studies explain the contributions of economics and environmental protection to social sustainability, and discuss how to achieve sustainable development (SD) through education, less is known about change processes in order to ensure the sustainable development at school. The authors emphasize that as active members of the school community, students should get involved in the school transformation processes. However, is a contemporary school ready for this? The study aims at answering the following questions: How are students as active participants of educational relationship involved in the change processes and how should their involvement be managed seeking sustainability by examining the education institution located in Lithuania? The findings demonstrate that the process of the student involvement in the school transformation process has been explored applying the qualitative approach strategies (integrated theoretical model for change management and case study) from two points of view: theoretical (by analyzing the documents governing the school transformation process) and practical (by analyzing the reflections of the school principal's in-depth interview concerning the student involvement in school transformation processes).

**Key words:** student, rules for students, sustainability, process of change

### Introduction

The complex theme of the article is attempted to be attested by a broader research framework selected owing to the nature of the theme. The research framework has been built taking into account (1) the steady progress of the United Nations that calls for achievement of more sustainable future goals; (2) the development of the Journal of Teacher Education for Sustainability (JTES) and the establishment of a researchers' collaboration research network that has been operating since 2002 and has accumulated experience of the gradual extension of the concept of sustainability as a reflection of transdisciplinarity that is characteristic of the complex and holistic nature of the phenomenon of sustainability; and (3) the findings of a case study on student involvement in educational change in Lithuania.

Reflected in the United Nations (UN) document "Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (2015), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) is the global agenda adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) for transforming the world towards a more sustainable future. This new agenda contains 17 goals and 169 specific targets. It can be stated that the role of the education system in sustainable development has been clearly revealed by the universal goal number four, providing inclusive and equitable education and lifelong learning opportunities for everybody.

The main aspect in the processes of embedding sustainability in management education and generating the knowledge the society needs is focused on the change process in education institutions. Education is both a goal in itself and a means for attaining all the other Sustainable Development Goals. It is not only an integral part of sustainable development, but also a key enabler for it. That is why education represents an essential strategy in the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives, 2017).

The establishment of the JTES and the development of a researchers' collaboration network represent a specific case that has gradually evolved over time as an example of collaboration of different higher education institutions through action research on the reorientation of teacher education towards sustainability that was initiated in 2000. Action research has explored a number of ideas related to the phenomenon of sustainability, such as research development in teacher education (Pipere, Veisson, & Salite, 2015), transformative education for sustainability (Bell, 2016), and action research on the development of future core competences (Kapenieks, 2016), the formation of teacher ecological "self" (Raus, 2016), the nature of sustainability from a transdisciplinary perspective (Salite, Drelinga, Iliško, Oļehnoviča, & Zariņa, 2016), teacher job dissatisfaction in terms of sustainability and social transformation (Okeke & Mtyuda, 2017), solutions to teacher-student conflicts (Ciuladiene & Kairiene, 2017), teaching and learning transformations that are important for sustainable development (Ichinose, 2017). These are just a few examples that illustrate the themes of JTES articles in recent years. A more comprehensive overview of sustainability and of the development of related ideas in JTES articles is available at Sciendo section <http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/jtes>.

Seeking to generalize issues arising from the extensive experience, which in action research manifest themselves as issues relating to the appropriate perspective choice in terms of sustainability, approaches that in education make it possible to understand the phenomenon of sustainability, as well as features that help identify sustainability at different levels, researchers investigated the experience relating to changes, which gradually evolved in the JTES network at the end of the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development and emerged as a new challenge for further development of ESD research and its wider use in education.

Seeking to ensure the continuity of sustainable society development, it is essential to turn back to the children, i.e., school where the shapers for the future society are being raised and developed. To ensure the decision-making process in line with the sustainable social development conditions, children have to be prepared for this now. This issue is currently topical in Lithuania as well.

School of general education is the most suitable place for this development where students, as the members of the school community, should be able to get involved in all processes associated with the school development from the very first days at school and to get prepared for independent decisions in the future. The case study performed in Lithuania and presented in the present article highlights a question that arose when

researching a theme where the complex nature of sustainability is inextricably related to participants and their activities: Does the contemporary school, undergoing transformations and adopting the appropriate decisions necessary for its development, involve the students as active participants? In our search for the theoretical basis for this question, we saw a great deal of diversity that came into the Lithuanian educational research as theoretical proposals. Diversity comes from all regions of the world and is currently associated with the idea of current competences, which clearly maintains its relation with the idea of transformative education that indicates the complexity of sustainability.

There is a general agreement that sustainability citizens need to have certain key competences that allow them to engage constructively and responsibly in the today's world. Competences describe the specific attributes individuals need for action and self-organization in various complex contexts and situations (Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives, 2017). Competences cannot be taught, but have to be developed by the learners themselves. They are acquired during action, on the basis of experience and reflection (UNESCO, 2015; Weinert, 2001).

Hopkins, Ainscow, and West (1998) defined the transformation of education as a complex phenomenon focused directly on the result – student achievements. The establishment of a reference system, when it comes to the development of a broader holistic framework for EDS, must necessarily begin with setting the educational aim (Fedosejeva et al., 2018) and state of science of pedagogy (Žogla, 2018) and professionalism in relation to quality of education and sustainability (Veisson & Kadabay, 2018). These authors emphasize the integrity and comprehensiveness of transformation as a process. According to them, an effect on the student achievements can be expected only when the transformation encompasses the entire chain of events from the education policy to the classroom activities (Hopkins et al., 1998; Hart & Brando, 2018; Sargeant, 2018). First, a student as the direct recipient of the transformation process benefits has an interest in the effectiveness of the education transformation; hence, the importance of students' participation at all stages of the transformation process raises no doubts. According to Želvys (2003), schools have to change in line with the surrounding setting; thus, all elements of the transformation process are important: procedures, works being carried out, new relations, new rules, external factors that do not depend on the contents of transformation and everything that promotes changes or raises doubts. However, the participants of the transformation process are not of lesser importance. Jenlink et al. (1998) and Mason (2016) provide the attributes of effective and systematic inclusion of the community members in the change process in the field of education: attention to children and their future: learning and personal development progress as the objective of all systemic changes; systemic thinking: the approach of the change participants to the education system should primarily be all-encompassing to enable them to understand the interdependence of the system elements better; inclusion: all stakeholders should be involved in the process; sense of ownership: all stakeholders / their groups should be responsible for a certain portion of changes and add their contribution to the process; simultaneous evolution: the education system, community and individuals should change at the same time. Moving towards the idea of sustainability during the change processes, we can follow Tulin's (2018) arguments that global and local sustainability issues motivate all institutions to develop solutions via collaborative partnerships. Based on these arguments, scholars (Hahn et al., 2014) argue that organizational value frames for sustainability institutional logics are defined as the socially constructed, historical patterns of material

practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality. It can be stated that complex social issues call for broader collaboration across different sectors so as to instigate transformative and sustainable social change (Yan et al., 2018).

To sum up, it is obvious that changes in the education system cannot occur separately from the inclusion and involvement of its key participants both for the benefit of the effectiveness of the changes per se and for the (self)development of the student competences for independent decisions in the future and for the teaching of democracy. In 1999, Morin said, "In democracy the individual is a citizen, a responsible person with legal status; he enjoys freedom to express his wishes and interests, he accepts responsibility as a member of the body politic" (Morin, 1999, p. 58). In any event, when striving for changes towards sustainable development, a student should be treated as an equal, active participant who is interested in exercising their rights, exactly as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines the children.

In 1992, Lithuania joined the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (hereinafter – Convention) and committed itself to ensure the enforcement and protection of the rights of the child by all possible means. Application of the provisions of the Convention began in all fields directly or indirectly associated with the children. Education system is one of such fields the children find themselves in if not from early age, but surely at least from the compulsory pre-school age to receive the preparation for exercising their right to be educated in schools of general education of the education system. Irrespective of the fact that a school as a component of the education system has its specific objectives associated with the (self)development of children, the rights of the child must be implemented there as well. Enacting children's rights in real life requires a children's rights-based school culture (Lansdown et al., 2014).

*For this reason, the change process and change management are analyzed while highlighting the synergy of this phenomenon in the system of education, seeking to involve a student in the process of school change by ensuring the sustainability of change.*

**A key research question to be addressed is the following:** How are students (as active participants of the educational relationship) involved in the change processes and how it should be managed to ensure the sustainability of changes?

We explored this research question via an inductive approach. *The research question has a general validity.* It is particularly relevant for education institutions located in the regions of Lithuania and sometimes not quite correctly characterized by a development delay. Indeed, it *represents two core dimensions of analysis*: the legal basis of education institution highlighting the sustainability of change (strategic documents, rules) and reflective involvement of students in transformation to drive the change and sustainability of regions.

The present study represents an imperative particularly for all primary schools located in the regions of Lithuania that struggle to find ways to be competitive.

**Research object** – students' inclusion in the school change processes.

**Research objectives** – to identify the prerequisites for the implementation of the rights of the child, as an active holder of rights and participant of the educational relationship, through the analysis of the documents governing the transformation of the primary school while ensuring the change sustainability (school regulations, rules for

the formation of the school council, student rules of conduct, and other operational documents) and reflection of the student inclusion in the school transformation process.

**Research methods:** systemic analysis of scientific literature, exploratory case study, discursive-qualitative content analysis of the documents of the organization under consideration, in-depth interview qualitative content analysis.

When examining the present phenomenon, the authors applied the qualitative approach strategies (*integrated theoretical model for change management and case study*) that allowed exploring the student inclusion in the school transformation process in two aspects: theoretical (by analyzing the documents governing the primary school transformation process while ensuring the sustainability of changes) and practical (by analyzing the reflections of a school principal on the student involvement in school transformation processes).

### Exploratory Case Study Presentation

Seeking to reply to the main question of the research, the authors chose the *exploratory case study* type. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), *exploratory case study* – qualitative case study is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. This type of case study is used to explore reflective situations and get feedback.

The main idea of the research carried out: institutionalization of changes in school and students' involvement in change processes and results of responsibility are obtained.

*A primary school located in a regional part of Lithuania* was selected for the research (established in 2006; an institution of average size where structural changes are being implemented) as the first stage of the formal education system, in which the fundamentals of self-development were formed, such as the students' approach to learning as a process, school community and responsibility. *Thus, Širvintos Primary School represents a typical district school of Lithuania that encounters the problem of student number decrease, which in turn leads to changes determined by external circumstances.* As the number of the general education schools in small towns decreases, residents of the rural areas face the accessibility possibilities that demand for higher financial and time costs. As a result, one of the targets of the National Education Strategy of Lithuania 2013–2022 approved by the Seimas of the Republic of Lithuania in 2013 (Official Gazette, 2013-12-30, No. 140-7095) refers to the optimization of the school network considering the interests of communities and those of children in particular, observing the principle of school effectiveness and social exclusion reduction.

Activities and transformation processes of a primary school are defined by the documents governing it: school objectives, mission, vision, strategy, regulations, rules for students, which together are not only the prerequisites for the education goals and sustainability, but also the requirements for the implementation of the rights of the child at school.

Analysis of the primary school documents is based on the role of the child as an active holder of the rights entrenched in the Convention. One of the principles of the Convention that shows directly whether a child is treated as an active subject and also, taking into account the purpose of the school, as an active participant of the educational relationship, is the right of the child to speak up on the matters that concern them. This right is also described as the child's participation right aimed at providing the opportunity

for the child to be actively involved in the life of family, school, community, and society. From the child's point of view, the right to participate is one of their key rights – the children want to participate and voice their opinion when all the decisions personally pertaining to them are made, from education to the voting right (Child's rights – how they are perceived by children, 2011 = Vaikų teisės – kaip jas suvokia vaikai, 2011). In many countries, children participation in social life is encouraged, i.e., political participation when representing the children's interests where the participation of the children implies not the statement of a specific child but rather the recognition and respect to the child's attitude and experience manifesting through interdependence (Fitzgerald et al., 2010).

The right of the child to voice their opinion on the issues pertaining to them indicates that a child must be provided with the conditions to express their opinion freely in a way acceptable to them. Children should have a special protection yet reasonable freedom and active participation in matters directly concerning their life (Kosher et al., 2016). Parents, school, teachers and other adults whose activities are associated with children are all responsible for the implementation of this right. The assurance of this right relies on two factors: *first*, creating the conditions for the children to express their opinion on each question pertaining to or concerning them. This action is imperative irrespective of the child's age, setting or other circumstances. *Second*, the decision whether the child's opinion should be taken into account depends on whether the opinion does not contradict the child's interests.

*Analysis of the school documents allows assessing only the conditions created for the children/students to participate actively in the decision-making process that concerns them; however, it does not allow establishing if the child's / student's opinion is taken into account.* Thus, when seeking for broader coverage of this social phenomenon and substantiation of the validity of the obtained data of the analysis, the authors decided to carry out a qualitative in-depth interview. This method revealed the reflection of the students' inclusion/involvement in the school transformation ensuring the change sustainability. Upon the completion of the content analysis of the qualitative in-depth interview, the research findings obtained in the course of the document analysis were triangulated to obtain the summarizing conclusions.

## Theoretical Background and Methodology of the Research

### General Overview

The theoretical foundation that has helped prepare for the research from the methodological point of view includes the following theoretical approaches:

- 1) *Sustainability and sustainable development psychology*, which supposes the well-being of an individual in the environment, hence, the well-being of individuals in their organizations. Sustainability and sustainable development psychology suggest that enhancement of the strengths of the organization members is the best way to demonstrate one's affiliation with the organization, to identify with it and participate in changes. Wissink et al. (2014) speak about successful identification of children at school, feeling of security, in line with the roles of the child as an active holder of rights entrenched in the Convention.



- 2) *An integrated theoretical model for change management* proposed by Jacobs et al. (2013). It has been selected for the research due to its coverage and scope of analysis. The presented model includes both internal and external elements (at the micro level – individual perception of changes; mezzo – leadership and organizational identity; and macro – environment). The model analyzes external (macro level), organizational culture (mezzo level) and individual (micro level) changes.
- The micro level focuses on the way the changes in the organization affect an individual.
  - The mezzo level explores the way the changes in the organization affect its identification and institutionalization processes (and vice versa).
  - The macro level analyzes the surroundings of the organization (Jacobs et al., 2013).

Following the *integrated theoretical model for change management*, an exploratory case study analysis is carried out on a *macro*- (analysis of the town/district situation), *mezzo*- (analysis of the school performance) and *micro*- (individual level – activity regulated by the students) levels.

The authors of the paper have carried out a *discursive content analysis of the documents of the organization in question*: (school regulations, rules for formation of the school council, rules of conduct for students and other strategic documents of activities). According to Creswell (2007), social information is best selected through a qualitative content analysis of the documents.

To answer the main question of the study in detail and to seek for research adequacy and openness for diversity, a new method of triangulation of research results has been applied: *a qualitative in-depth interview*. The reflective involvement of students in change process seeking to sustain and to drive change and sustainability in education of regions has been analyzed.

According to Patton (2002) and Creswell (2009), qualitative interviews provide in-depth, contextualized, open-ended responses from research participants about their views, opinions, feelings, knowledge, and experiences.

Many scholars (King & Horrocks, 2010; Hennink et al., 2011; Alvesson, 2011; Seidman, 2013; Seitz, 2015) discuss in-depth interview techniques and scenarios.

## The Main Findings and Conceptual Reflection

### Qualitative Content Analysis of the Documents

*Discursive analysis of the documents* allowed examining the selected case at an individual level – activity regulated by the students.

**Macro.** The school is a budget-funded school of general education that provides education services; thus, its activities depend on the education policy formed in the country and district. Social factors that affect the changes at school and identified by the school should be noted: decrease in the student number; busy parents who devote little time and attention to children; increase in the number of students with special education needs; increasing number of students with behavior and emotional disorders; students influenced by the spreading negative external social factors – violence, unemployment, and alcohol abuse.

**Mezzo.** One of the factors that drives changes is the school attendance of students being raised in dysfunctional families. This problem is dealt with by the school staff team together with interested institutions and student parents.

The objective set in the strategic plan for 2017–2019 of the primary school (hereinafter – school) includes the implementation of the targets set for the school while providing for and planning the transformation changes. Thus, it can be stated that the school functioning is based on a flexible approach to the rapidly changing environmental conditions. However, one document was lacking among the documents followed by the school when drawing up the strategic plan – the Convention as the supreme legal document in the field of the children's rights implementation that a school should follow ensuring the implementation and protection of the rights of the child at school. Apart from other legal acts, the activities of the school are governed by the Convention; it is confirmed by the legal acts referred to in the strategic plan and governing the school activities. This notwithstanding, the fact that the school does not follow the provisions of the Convention in foreseeing the prospects for its activities implies that the provisions of the Convention are not given priority regardless of the fact that the key objectives and goals of the school as well as the activities pertain to children and ensure their well-being.

The school vision is a cooperating and learning school, which raises active, creative and honest students who have the need to learn and acquire competences necessary in a modern changing society, while taking individual needs and abilities into account. The fact that the school defines itself as a cooperating and learning entity shows its predisposition for changes. The vision clearly shows the attitude of the school to each child as a personality – it is planned to take individual needs and abilities into account, which is in line with the importance of seeing each child and responding to their special needs and interests emphasized in the Convention. However, in the school vision a child is seen as a passive participant of the educational relationship because the school identifies the development of students as its primary activity without giving consideration to the circumstance that a student is an active participant of the relationship, whereas learning is the right of the child. Consequently, development activities at school are possible only through reciprocal relationship: school – student, teacher – student, where both participants are active.

The school mission foresees the provision of primary education, preschool education and informal education for children in line with contemporary requirements at school that is open for changes, collaboration, and learning and creates comfortable and safe environment. The school mission also shows flexibility to changes and positive approach to cooperation, creating the preconditions for a dialogue among all stakeholders. It is probable that a student is also seen as a stakeholder and dialogue participant who, as provided by the Convention, has the right to voice their opinion on the issues that concern them or pertain to them. Adults, in this case – the school and teachers, have to create the conditions to freely express the opinion in ways acceptable for the students.

The school has separately noted its philosophy at the center of which there is the child, who is accepted as he/she is seeing their development potential and possibilities. The purpose and significance of the school activities are focused on the child that is the reason of the school existence, which is entirely in line with the essence of the implementation of the rights of a child based on the anthropocentric approach to the child.

Strategic plan of the primary school for 2017–2019 lists the values followed by the school community: cooperation, respect, professional excellence, safety, citizenship,



activity and openness to changes. Further, according to priority areas, the plan elaborates on the strategy implementation measures, implementation period, sources of funds, responsible persons and measure assessment indicators. When analyzing the strategic plan implementation preconditions, it can be seen that the students are almost never included in activities or are designated as passive participants only – as implementers whose activities are planned and foreseen in advance; however, not as participants involved in the creation of activities.

The strategic plan implementation section states that the strategic plan implementation supervision group presents the monitoring results to the school community – school council, teachers' council. The school community members are able to voice their opinion and to submit suggestions. It is noteworthy that the school community is defined as the school council and teachers' council. The school council comprises 5 teachers and 5 student parents. The teachers' council comprises the principal, associate principal for development, all teachers, specialists who provide educational assistance, a librarian and other persons directly involved in the development process, except the students. Thus, regardless of the fact that the school mission, philosophy, and principles of the community activities declare the student as an active and equal member of the school community, in school documents they are not treated as community members and therefore have no possibilities to participate in the decision-making process pertaining to the school activities and to express their opinion. Kılıç and Öztürk (2018), while examining the implementation of the right of the child to attend school, also found that, despite legal regulation, children's participation in the school commission was not ensured.

The school regulations that govern the school activities state that the purpose of the school activities is to raise an active and creative child who has acquired fundamental literacy and social, cognitive, information and activity abilities as well as general values and who is prepared to study further according to the basic education curricula. The declared purpose of the school activities is focused on the development of an independent, active and responsible child; however, a question arises – how the school intends to develop the above-mentioned features if the students are not included in the decision-making process important for the school and not enabled to participate in the supreme school self-governance body, which solves the questions the school faces – school council, so that they have the possibility to express their opinion on the issues that concern the students directly, while representing the major part of the school community – students. Although the school regulations establish that the school council represents the students, parents (carers, custodians), teachers and local community, neither students, nor the local community are included in the school council. Thus, reasonable doubts arise concerning the implementation of Article 6 of the Convention and other articles respectively regardless of the school stating in its documents that it follows the Convention.

**Micro.** When assessing the preconditions for the assurance of the Convention at school at the individual – student's – level, rules of conduct for students are analyzed evaluating their approval, structure and contents. These rules represent a document that reflects the attitude of the school community to numerous aspects associated with educational relationship, which demonstrate the approach of the school to the student as a participant of the educational relationship (Kairienė, 2017).

The rules of conduct for students (hereinafter – rules) under consideration were approved by the order of the school principal in 2012 and updated in 2016. It suggests that they are not reviewed annually; hence, it is likely that the children, as they start

school, are not included in the creation and deliberation process of the rules of conduct, and they are obligated to observe the rules for students created by adults (school administration and teachers). However, they are not enabled to participate in the rule creation process and correspondingly not enabled to commit themselves to observe them, which would be more effective.

Rules for the students comprise the parts described as *Students must*, *Students are prohibited from*, *Incentives for students*, *Disciplinary measures for non-compliant students and general conditions for applying them*. The titles of the parts of the rules do not include the rights of the students or such aspects on conduct at school, which are permitted. Such sections of the rules show the attitude of the school to the student as someone not equal, who has no rights, who is imposed responsibilities, prohibitions and disciplinary measures. It seems that the school views students as completely mature and responsible individuals, who are aware of the way they should behave because the rules do not define the conduct guidelines for the children, but rather emphasize duties and prohibitions and view them as potential miscreants, providing in advance for responsibilities and sanctions.

The *Students must* part of the rules comprises 14 points and its contents are based on responsibility of the students for activities the parents should assume responsibility instead, taking the age of the students into account (7–11 years), in the beginning fully and eventually, as the child grows and matures, partially. For example, the rules establish that *the student must come to school on time and not to miss the lessons without a justifiable reason. If 3 days of school are missed, the student has to bring a written explanation of their parents (carers, custodians), if 4 and more days are missed – a certificate from the physician. If the student cannot participate in one or several lessons due to an important reason, their parents (carers, custodians) should notify the class tutor in advance*. Usually, the children start school at 7. At this age, children are generally not yet sufficiently mature and self-sustainable to be able to take care of their daily regime and agenda, and to come to school on time. Generally, at least when the child starts school, parents take care of the children coming to school on time. Thus, it is obvious that the responsibility established for the students of primary classes is not in line with their age and maturity. Further requirements and responsibilities are associated with obtaining of documents that justify the missed classes. The same rules establish that missed classes are justified by parents or physician; it is therefore not understandable why this responsibility is imposed on the child. It is up to the parents to produce a written explanation to the school concerning the classes missed by their child. If the child becomes ill, their parents decide whether to take them to the health care institution or not; thus, the availability of the physician's certificate does not depend on the child's decisions and actions.

The *Students must* part of the rules defines the students' behavior at school: *to take care of schoolbooks and other books and teaching aids; to study thoroughly, to be dutiful and disciplined; to conduct oneself in a cultured manner in lessons and during breaks; to speak politely* etc.

The *Students are prohibited from* part of the rules comprises three items. One stipulates the prohibition to use mobile phones during lessons, breaks and other activities except when permitted by the tutor. The second item is intended for ensuring the student safety – prohibition to leave the school territory without notifying the tutor. The third item is also aimed at ensuring student safety at school – *students are prohibited from bringing to school knives, matches, lighters, explosives and other items that might pose*

*hazard to health. It is prohibited to bring medicine, psychotropic substances, except for medicine necessary for their health.* Considering the age of the students for whom these rules are intended, their ability to understand certain terms, for instance, *psychotropic substances*, and to perceive the meaning of the statement *other items that might pose hazard to health* is under question. Speaking of the last, such items that might pose a health hazard might be very different and hazard to health is posed not by the items per se due to features inherent to them, but by the unsuitable use not according to purpose or incautious use of the same. Children aged 7–11 possess insufficient knowledge and experience to know about things, in respect of which the rules provide prohibitions. It also has to be noted that this part of the rules for some reason provides for the responsibility of the parents to inform the tutor of the medicines taken by their child, although the rules are intended for the students.

The *Incentives for students'* part of the rules comprises four items, which provide for the verbal or written praise of the principal, tutor or other school staff member. Naturally, the objective of the incentives part should be the motivation of students to behave in a certain way and to take active part in school activities; this is what they should be incentivized for. However, the behaviors promoted by the school in this part are not described at all. Repeating the above, when speaking about a 7–11-year-old child, it is obvious that their awareness of the behavior proper and acceptable at school that should be encouraged is very limited. Thus, this section of the rules might be an excellent place to lay down in brief the main positive rules for student behavior, so that the children would know how they need to conduct themselves at school, seeing that negative and prohibiting forms of student behaviors were sufficiently comprehensively and broadly presented in parts analyzed before.

The *Disciplinary measures for non-compliant students and general conditions for applying them* part of the rules comprises six items establishing the actions that might be assumed by the principal, tutor and social educator if the student behaves unsuitably, seeking to ensure the safety of the student and other children.

Analyzing the student rules as a whole, it is obvious that an unproportionately large number of the rules (almost their entire contents) are devoted to the responsibilities of the students, prohibitions or disciplining, except for the established incentives. However, there is not a single sentence describing the behaviors that should be aimed at and that are encouraged. As a result, the rules cannot be treated as an educating means promoting positive student behavior. It can only be expected that the school management, teachers, parents and local community present a perfect role model for the students and will be sufficient in student development.

### **Interpretative In-depth Interview Analysis: Reflection of the Students' Involvement in the Process of School Change**

The authors constructed the guidelines of an in-depth interview (7 questions were prepared for the informer: Q1–Q7) and planned the course of the interview in line with the 4 stages of individual interview (to exchange information before the interview; beginning of the interview – ‘warm-up’; closure of the interview questions and summary).

Q1. Your school nowadays is undergoing changes due to internal and external factors, and the school is forced to make decisions that are relevant to its development. Who makes the decisions that are important for school development?

- Q2. How are students involved in the processes of change consideration and decision-making? What is the role of students in the decision-making process?
- Q3. What opportunities do students have at school to express their views on issues that concern them?
- Q4. Why are student representatives not included in the processes of school change strategies and decision-making?
- Q5. How would you describe the position of students as members of the school community compared to other members?
- Q6. What and how are students allowed to participate in the creation of their own rules?
- Q7. How do you evaluate the students' commitment to the rules they have set?

When presenting the qualitative in-depth interview with the school principal, a qualitative content analysis was carried out. The questions/guidelines of the interview were grouped into **subject lines I, II, III** corresponding to the *macro*, *mezzo* and *micro* levels of analysis: (I – student involvement in the discussion of *school-level* issues and decision-making; II – student involvement and participation in the discussion and decision-making at the *class* level; and III – opportunities to express one's opinion on issues of concern at the *individual* level).

*Interpretative content analysis was applied to interview materials.*

**I – Student involvement in the discussion of *school-level* issues and decision-making.** *“School principal makes the decisions important for the school development; however, the school community is also involved in the decision-making process, i.e., teachers, specialists of assistance for the students, student parents, school management, students, and, as appropriate, other staff (non-educators), representatives of local community or self-government <...> for this purpose, surveys of students, their parents, teachers and specialists of assistance for the students are carried out, where different groups of the school community express their opinion or present a situation assessment”.* The entire school community, including the students, is involved in the decision-making process. Subject to the issue under consideration, further examination of the issue is continued in the appropriate school self-governance institutions – teachers' council, methodological group of primary education teachers, labor council or school council. This notwithstanding, neither self-governance institution includes students. Regardless of specific school self-governance institutions such as teachers' council or labor council, where it is not expedient to include students' representatives, the students are not included in the school council either, regardless of the fact that given its intended purpose it should involve representatives of all groups comprising the school community. *“Students are not included in the council due to their age because 6–10-year aged students attend this school”.* In this case, the age criterion cannot serve as an obstacle to include the students in the most important self-governance structure of the school and for them to participate in the discussion of issues that concern them directly in accordance with the provision of the Convention concerning the child's right to participate. The children should be enabled to express their opinion in the ways acceptable to them on the issue that concerns them, and this condition is imperative. The active participation of children in the rule-making process should be taken as a basis even in the pre-school period (Durmuşoğlu Saltalı & Arslan, 2013).

The school has two-tiered rules of conduct for the students – those of the entire school and of the class. Although *“<...> efforts are made to ensure the consistency of*

*the school and class rules” and to include the students in the creation processes of rules of conduct of both types, based on the analysis of the school rules of conduct presented above, doubts arise concerning the inclusion of the students in the establishment of the school rules of conduct because “<...> on the first week of each academic year, students are familiarized with the rules of conduct for students of our school. The rules are explained to them, and a discussion is held what each of them means, why it is important, why it has to be observed and what will happen if it is not observed”. Although it is stated that “<...> when the students are being familiarized with the school rules of conduct, they can provide suggestions on their modification and revision”, as it has already been mentioned the periodicity of the rule approval by the order of the principal shows that students do not take active part in this process and it can be therefore assumed that the students are not treated as active and equal participants of the educational relationship. Rules are delegated to the students and they do not have realistic opportunities to get involved in the school rules of conduct and to commit themselves to observe them.*

**II – Student involvement and participation in the discussion and decision-making at the class level.** Certain indications of student participation and representation of their interests can be seen in the self-governance at the class level – “<...> in classes, self-governance bodies of students operate, i.e., elders are elected as well as their deputies”; however, their activities are limited to class matters; these students do not represent the interests of their class in higher structures at school, where issues of importance to the entire school are discussed.

Nonetheless, students are enabled to express their opinion in ways provided for in advance: they participate in surveys on certain issues associated with class activities: “<...> when implementing class activities, organizing educational outings, creating the class rules of conduct, planning and organizing events, and setting up educational environments <...>; <...> they self-assess their achievements <...>; <...> fourth-graders participate in the self-assessment of school performance – answer the presented questions about the quality of lessons, express their view on the methods applied in class and assignments given <...>; <...> students of all classes participate in a taunting prevalence survey <...>, <...> in school microclimate assessment <...>; <...> every year, students of all classes take part in the survey of non-formal education needs (they rate the extracurricular activities at school, express their wishes for the coming academic year) <...>; <...> at the end of the academic year, fourth-graders usually write a letter to the school principal “If I were a principal...”, in which they express their wishes, preferences and vision”. All the mentioned ways and issues on which the students can express their opinion are provided for in advance, i.e., a given topic or field of survey initiated by school administration or tutors.

Participation of the students in the setting of the class rules of conduct is also very clearly defined: “<...> all students of the class take part in the setting of the class rules of conduct. First, they work in small groups, where they discuss how one should behave at school and write down the rules of conduct, they propose. Later on, each group presents their rules to their classmates. A discussion is held in class, and class rules of conduct are drawn up. In doing so, attention is paid to positive framing of statements”. The model for the creation and discussion of the class rules of conduct enables the expression of one’s opinion and making suggestions and discussing in the process of rule creation and approval.

**III – Opportunities to express one's opinion on issues of concern at the *individual* level.** Students are also provided the opportunity to speak on the topics of concern to them that are not defined in advance, to provide information on the issues that seem important to them “<...> *directly to the tutor after each lesson, event or other occurrence at school* <...>; <...> *during class hour that takes place every week* <...>; <...> *to the specialists who provide assistance to students, as required, applying to them directly* <...>; <...> *submit their remarks about school activities or staff at any time in writing, i.e., students write a note and put it in the box in the school corridor* <...>”. All the methods provided enable the students to speak, propose, inform or complain; however, it does not create the preconditions for active involvement or initiation of activities important to them, associated with changes in class or school.

Taking into account the reflection of the students' involvement in the school transformation process and the qualitative in-depth interview analysis, it can be stated that actual possibilities for the students to express their opinion on the issues that worry or concern them and to take part in the decision-making process associated with their activities exist at the class or individual level only. The students are included in the deliberation on the school affairs of higher level only when collecting information on a certain and generally predefined subject, as informers; however, the students are no longer included in subsequent stages of deliberation, discussion and voting – active participation in the decision-making process that is important for the school.

### Conclusions and Discussion

The case study has shown that the changes occurring at the macro-level influence the functioning of the school and drive the change processes. The analysis at the mezzo-level has revealed that the planned transformation processes seeking for sustainability and reflected in the school documents are first oriented to the assurance of the students' well-being (Salite, 2002). However, the student as the beneficiary of advantages yielded by the changes is not included in the processes of deliberation, planning and decision-making; the students are not included in self-governance structures at school and they are not enabled to represent their rights and interests on the issues that concern them. The analysis at the micro-level has suggested that the students are included as active participants at the class level only and excluded from the creation of school rules of conduct that directly concern them. The school rules of conduct are dominated by the disciplining attitude, their requirements are inconsistent with the students' development level, and responsibility for the decisions and actions of adults is delegated.

To sum up the reflection of the students' involvement in the school transformation process, it can be stated that the realistic possibilities for the students to express their opinion on the issues that worry or concern them and to take part in the decision-making process associated with their activities exist at the class or individual level only. The students are included in the deliberation on the school affairs of higher level only when collecting information on a certain and generally predefined subject, as informers; however, the students are no longer included in subsequent stages of deliberation and discussion – active participation in the decision-making process that is important for the school.



Considering that the study reflects the data from one case study only, the authors would like to note that it could be considered a limitation of the study determining the possibility to expand the analysis in the future, also applying a quantitative strategy.

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